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103rd plenary meeting
Monday, 26 March 2012, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Al-Nasser. . . . . (Qatar)

The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

Agenda item 138 (*continued*)

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/66/668/Add.8)

The President: I should like, in keeping with the established practice, to draw the attention of the General Assembly to document A/66/668/Add.8, in which the Secretary-General informs the President of the General Assembly that, since the issuance of his communication contained in document A/66/668/Add.7, Cape Verde and the Gambia have made the payments necessary to reduce their arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of the information contained in that document?

It was so decided.

The President: I should also like to inform members that, since the issuance of document A/66/668/Add.8, Kyrgyzstan has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of that information?

It was so decided.

The President: That information will be reflected in document A/66/668/Add.9, to be issued at a later date.

Agenda item 119 (*continued*)

Follow-up to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

Commemorative meeting on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The President: Members will recall that the General Assembly held the debate on agenda item 119 at its 83rd plenary meeting, on 12 December 2011, and adopted resolution 66/114, entitled "Permanent memorial to and remembrance of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade".

We are here to commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We are here to acknowledge the long suffering of innocent victims and the courage of heroes, resisters and survivors of slavery and the slave trade. We are here to honour millions of Africans forcibly removed from their homes and cast into inhuman conditions. We are here to celebrate the courage of countless men and women who rebelled against that cruel and brutal practice in order to regain freedom, dignity and independence.

The terrible impacts of slavery and the slave trade are still felt to this day. They have devastated continents and countries. They have led to profound social and economic inequalities, and have given rise to hatred, racism and prejudice. We are here today not only to

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raise awareness about the consequences of the slave trade and slavery but, most important, to ensure that such systematic abuse of human rights is never repeated again.

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms". Yet, more than 200 years since the abolition of slavery, we are again faced with this scourge.

Contemporary forms of slavery and slave-like practices have emerged in the forms of racism, trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, child labour, forced marriage, and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict. Poverty, illiteracy and economic, social and gender inequality are all factors that worsen modern forms of slavery. Combating slavery means taking an all-encompassing approach throughlaws, mechanisms, cooperation, outreach programmes and education. Instruments that are already in place, including the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, as well as the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, should be fully utilized to bring about necessary change in attitudes and customs, punish the offenders and support innocent victims in regaining their lives and dignity.

The United Nations and all its Members have an obligation to work tirelessly to eradicate modern forms of slavery. It is a fight that goes beyond the role of Governments. Everyone, including the private sector, civil society and individuals, has an important part to play. That is why, on 3 April here in New York, I intend to convene an interactive dialogue on the theme "Fighting human trafficking: partnership and innovation to end violence against women and girls". The event will be organized in cooperation with the Group of Friends United against Human Trafficking and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Rising to the challenges before us will require solidarity, commitment, engagement and partnership from all segments of society. We have to work closely to educate future generations about the fact that slavery in any form is unacceptable. Commemorating the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade provides us with an opportunity to keep that issue visible. We can also raise awareness of the dangers associated with racism and prejudice and ensure that one of the worst violations of human rights in the history of humankind is never forgotten.

In conclusion, I would like to commend the efforts of the steering committee of the Caribbean Community and the African Group, as well as the Department of Public Information, for organizing this special commemorative meeting to pay homage to the heroes, resisters and survivors.Let us learn from the horrors and the sacrifices of the past and ensure, through concrete actions and results, that slavery in all its forms is forever eliminated.

I would also like to encourage Member States to contribute to the Fund. That is very important and I hope it will be given consideration.

I now give the floor to the Deputy Secretary-General.

The Deputy Secretary-General: It is a pleasure to join all present for this important observance. Let me offer a special welcome to all our guests, including the performers who will grace this event. I bring warm greetings from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who stands with us on this Day and on this cause.

The transatlantic slave trade was a tragedy because of slavery's fundamental barbarism and immense scope, and because of its organized, systematic nature. One set of human beings — the traders, owners and others who participated in and profited from that evil enterprise — elevated themselves above another, assaulting their victims' very essence.

Let me share with those present just a brief snippet of testimony from a former slave. That testimony has been posted on the United Nations Radio website as part of our information outreach for this Day. "I can remember", she said, when "they carried my father away and carried two sisters and one brother, and left me".

This International Day was established for her and for the many millions of people whose lives and families were destroyed and whose dignity was brutally negated. The United Nations website provides more information on what this and other former slaves have had to say about heir experience. Other selections feature scholars and others talking about slavery's origins, its hideous mechanics, its impact and its legacy. I urge everyone to take advantage of this important resource.

The United Nations will be commemorating the suffering of the victims in another way: with a permanent memorial to be erected here at Headquarters. That memorial will rightly recognize that this tragedy, which had its most horrendous impact on Africans and people of African descent, also disgraced humankind as a whole.

In addition to remembering the crimes of the slave trade, we also use this Day to teach about the causes and consequences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. We have a shared responsibility to be vigilant about the many contemporary forms of slavery, including debt bondage, trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, the worst forms of child labour, forced marriage and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

New laws, institutions and mindsets have given us better tools for the struggle against those ills. Yet we must also acknowledge that bias is on the increase in many parts of the world. We can still see discriminatory practices gaining political, moral and even legal recognition, including through the platforms of some political parties and organizations, and through the use of modern communication technologies to disseminate ideas based on the notion of racial superiority.

The United Nations remains firmly committed to countering such hateful acts and trends. This is a matter of principle, in keeping with the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Political Declaration adopted at last year's High-level Meeting of the General Assembly. It is also a means to an end, since intolerance and discrimination are among the roots of conflict and are major obstacles to development.

The theme of this year's observance, "Honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors", pays tribute to those who stood up against slavery when the trade was at its height, and those who stand up now to protect against its manifestations today. On this International Day, let us all reaffirm our commitment to combating racism and to building societies based on justice, equality and solidarity.

The President: Before proceeding further, I should like to consult Member States on the format of today's commemorative meeting.

Members will recall that at its 2nd plenary meeting, on 16 September 2011, the General Assembly approved the recommendation of the General Committee that the format for commemorative meetings include statements by the President of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General, the Chairmen of the five regional groups and the representative of the host country.

If there is no objection, and without setting a precedent, may I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to include in today's meeting a statement by Mr. Rick Kittles, Scientific Director of Washington, D.C.-based African Ancestry Incorporated, and some cultural presentations?

It was so decided.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Zimbabwe, who will speak on behalf of the Group of African States.

Mr. Chipaziwa (Zimbabwe): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the African Group on this solemn occasion of the commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade with the theme "Honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors".

At the outset, let me convey the African Group's sincere appreciation of the steadfast and commendable efforts of our colleagues in the Caribbean Community in sustaining the momentum of raising awareness of this painful chapter in our shared history. For the same reason, the African Group also appreciates the Secretariat's efforts, particularly those of the Department of Information and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as other concerned stakeholders. Allow me also to reiterate that Africa continues to fully and unconditionally support those efforts, whose purpose is to ensure that such barbaric, primitive, State-condoned and blatant abuses of human rights are condemned by all and that they never happen again, in whatever form.

It is the sincere hope of Africa that people the world over will pay tribute to the victims of the abhorrent commerce in humans and vow to abolish such crimes forever. This Day is an opportunity to reflect on and address the historic legacy of the slave trade, which still characterizes modern perceptions and the treatment of Africans as well as descendants of enslaved Africans. It is a fact that, hundreds of years after most countries officially abolished slavery, Africans in the diaspora and people of African descent who may or may not be descended from slaves continue to suffer from the racial

discrimination that characterized that frightful era. Surely this must come to an end. If all Member States are committed to eradicating those traces of slavery, it is imperative that they vigorously implement programmes and activities that disseminate that message of equality and respect for the diversity of all peoples within their territories.

The African Group continues to stress the importance and centrality of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, which resulted from the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, as a turning point for the international community which recognized past injustices and the need to rectify the current situation of peoples of African descent. The 2009 outcome of the Durban review process is also pivotal in combating racial discrimination and its effects. All countries should embrace the recommendations from those processes. We add that there is no value in demonizing those noble processes.

It is also our considered view that honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors will not be enough without addressing the issue of reparations. The African Group will continue to push for the matter be deliberated in the General Assembly. Attention to the issue is long overdue. What we can also promise is that that demand will not go away.

Unfortunately, despite the unequivocal abolition of slavery, its contemporary forms and manifestations have not been eradicated. Millions of human beings, including women and children from all over the world, are trapped in serfdom, forced and bonded labour, trafficking, domestic slavery, sexual slavery and other abhorrent practices. Those practices must be eradicated. All Governments must commit to preventing those vices from manifesting themselves on their territories.

The African Group is supportive of the efforts to erect a permanent memorial at United Nations Headquarters in honour of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. The African Group believes that once finalized, the memorial should acknowledge the crimes and atrocities perpetrated over the course of four centuries and serve as an educational tool to inform future generations of the mechanisms and mindsets that gave rise to that tragedy. Hopefully, the permanent memorial will also go a long way towards providing a clear rebuke to those who continue to deny that slavery was a result of extreme racial discrimination. What is also so incomprehensible is the denial of the huge contributions made by slaves to the creation of wealth in the lands to which they were forcibly taken.

The African Group recognizes the importance and necessity of sustained voluntary contributions for erecting the permanent memorial. We urge those who have not yet done so to contribute to the Trust Fund. Our collective minds, and education, will ensure that those gallant women and men of Africa are never forgotten. We would also add that these western shores were not the only destination of African slaves throughout the centuries.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Federated States of Micronesia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Asian and Pacific States.

Mrs. Chigiyal (Federated States of Micronesia): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Asian and Pacific States.

Today, as we pause to observe the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, it is only proper and fitting that the General Assembly pay solemn tribute to the millions of victims of one of the greatest crimes committed against humankind. As we reflect on the theme of this year's commemoration, "Honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors", we pay tribute to the millions of Africans who were subjected to one of the greatest historical injustices and atrocities ever committed against humankind. In our remembrance and tribute to those heroes, we must approach that terrible human tragedy with far greater commitment to rid the world of racism, hatred, intolerance, prejudice and the many other faces it has taken to manifest itself in our world today.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Nothing less is required of us if we are to realize the principles enshrined in the Declaration.

We must all take encouragement in the great initiative that our brothers and sisters from the States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) spearheaded, which has culminated in today's annual commemoration. The opportunity for a moral recommitment to the principles and purposes laid down in the United Nations Charter is here, and must include the determination to

take action across the entire spectrum of the General Assembly's agenda — and in our societies as well — to combat the legacy of racial discrimination, bigotry and prejudice.

With due respect, I would go further and say that moral recommitment must also include our determination to take actions that include supporting the Member States of CARICOM and other States Members that have united in purpose and efforts to erect on the grounds of the United Nations a lasting symbol in tribute to the heroes and the lessons that we must embrace from their courage, dignity, resilience and the fight for equality and humanity, lest their struggles be forgotten.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Albania, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Mr. Jorgji (Albania): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

We have gathered at a special meeting today to commemorate the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, under the theme "Honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors". For several centuries, millions of people of African descent were taken from their homes and families and forcibly shipped across the Atlantic. Many of them lost their lives due to the appalling inhuman conditions in which they were kept and treated during their journey, while those who survived were forced to work as slaves and were deprived of any dignity or rights.

Despite all the suffering and oppression, the hope and spirit of freedom of the slaves prevailed and thrived. Their struggle was not in vain. In the spring of 1807, the transatlantic slave trade was abolished, while society's determination to put a definitive end to such practices continued to grow.

More than 140 years later, the peoples of the United Nations decided, by adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to speak loud and clear. In its Article 1, that historic document states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Furthermore, in its Article 4, the Declaration states that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

At today's commemoration of the 205th anniversary of the day that marked the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, we pay special tribute to the courage and resilience of those brave men and women who stood up and fought against the system, thus becoming an inspiration not only to those who suffered as they did, but also to many other free people with free minds who engaged themselves in anti-slavery movements, risking their lives and often paying the ultimate price for their noble beliefs.

Apart from the suffering of the slaves themselves, the African continent, too, experienced the long-lasting consequences of the transatlantic slave trade in many ways. Therefore, such commemorative events are of particular importance and significance, not only for remembering the victims of slavery and paying tribute to those who bravely fought against it, but also to ensure that everyone is aware of that tragic part of the history of humankind in order to draw lessons from it and to make sure that such atrocities are prevented from being repeated in any form in the future.

In view of all this, on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States I would like to congratulate the Steering Committee comprising States members of the Caribbean Community and the African Group, as well as representatives of the Secretariat, on having organized the week-long series of remembrance events, including this commemorative meeting of the General Assembly. In particular, we appreciate the role of those countries whose initiative, leadership and commitment led to the adoption of resolutions 61/19 and 65/239, establishing the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and laying the ground for the erection of a permanent memorial here at Headquarters.

In conclusion, as we commemorate the abolition of slavery more than two centuries ago, we are aware that the battle against that phenomenon is still far from over. We still witness modern forms of slavery, including forced labour and the trafficking of women and children, among others. Such crimes continue to have a serious negative impact on people's lives and societies. We cannot and should not look away and ignore such realities. Instead, this moment of remembrance and reflection should inspire us to enhance our efforts and to make use of all means available in order to put an end to such criminal practices, while, at the same time, trying to cut and eliminate the roots that generate them and keep them alive.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Grenada, who will speak on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean States.

Ms. Williams (Grenada): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean States on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave on today's theme "Honouring the heroes, resisters and survivors".

According to a scholar from the Caribbean and Latin American country of Guyana, long before Columbus came to the new world there were Africans living in the Americas. That fascinating historical account by Ian van Sertima did not develop the full quality of the social relations between Africans and the peoples of Central and South America. However, we know that, with the advent of the slave trade and slavery in the Americas, a new and miserable day dawned for the Africans then enslaved in the Americas.

That history of enslavement is terrible, but it is not the whole story. For while the politically and historically inquisitive continue to appropriately debate the many contours and textures of slavery, such inquiries continue to reveal other parts of the story — that there was resistance to slavery by those who fought for justice against that horrific system of injustice.

Today, we pause to be part of that more elevating part of the slavery story by honouring the great success of human emancipation through the prism of the celebration of our heroes, resisters and survivors. In testimony to the greatness of the human will, from that evil came greatness and, in testimony to the proud legacy of those heroes, today and always, we must join all other generations who have followed since and become much more than survivors. We must work for universal freedom. Like heroes, we, too, must become deserving inheritors of the great legacy of freedom fought for and won.

That irrepressible human impulse for dignity, which we need and claim, was demonstrated in our region as early as 1549 by Felipillo in an anti-slavery revolt in the Pearl Islands on Panama's Pacific coast and by another hero, Bayano. That led to one of the largest slave revolts of the sixteenth century in the Americas, setting up autonomous regions known as palenques, not unlike the quilombos of Brazil or the Saramaka of Suriname, indeed, Maroon communities, Garifunas or free societies all a ross the Americas.

On the Gulf of Mexico coast, Yanga, named after Gaspar Yanga, an African who led a rebellion in the late sixteenth century and fought off attempts to retake the settlement, is reportedly the first town of free African slaves in the Americas. In today's cultural and ethnic composition of the Americas, without the parentage, food, family life, music, dance, religion, and more, of its African members, the grouping that today we call Latino/Latina would not exist with such rich variety.

Among our own celebrated heroes, we count Toussaint Louveture, who, in 1804, co-founded today's Haiti, the first black independent republic in the world. We in Grenada gave to Haiti's decades-long struggle for emancipation our own freedom fighter, Julien Fedon, who was deported first from one French colony, that is, Grenada, to another — Haiti, seeking to quell his leadership. But it was in Haiti, with women and men of vision and courage, that, all together, they led a historic slave revolt that succeeded. In short, those island freedom fighters helped to spread freedom across Latin America, becoming pillars of support to the efforts of the liberator Simón Bolívar.

Indeed, all across the Americas, heroes of resistance to slavery abound: John Chatoyer of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Cudjoe of Guyana and Zumbi dos Palmares of Brazil, as well as personalities such as President Ramón Castilla y Marquesado of Peru, whose legislative agenda was important to ending slavery in that South American country.

The resistance was led by men and by women. Nanny of Jamaica is heralded as the female heroine, par excellence, whose strategic work as a military leader eventually led to the ending of slavery in that country and the early beginnings of women's political leadership.Today, in 2012, in the Americas we boast four women heads of Government — in Brazil, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Nanny and all women freedom fighters would be proud.

We hail the myriad freedoms won as fundamental rights now recognized by the international community and defended across the Caribbean and Latin America and, of course, across the globe. We enjoy the privileges of free society, free enterprise and equal opportunity due to the vision and work of liberation of millions of people of a single ethnic group, namely, Africans in the new world.

Today, the aspirations of people of African descent in the Americas reflect global aspirations. Their contributions are found in every walk of life. In Cuba, this year marks the 200th Anniversary of José Antonio Aponte's anti-slavery uprising. In their long

struggle for independence, African slaves and their descendents have contributed decisively to shaping the Cuban nationality. And so we bow low to bravery in the creation of freedom. We are proud that our African ancestors in the Caribbean and Latin America left their indelible mark for freedom. That is our shining inheritance; that is our unmitigated responsibility to continue. Our collective responsibility is therefore to carry on the legacy of the fight for human dignity, justice and freedom in this hallowed institution of the United Nations.

We recognize the strong solidarity and support that exists between the Caribbean Community and the African Group, who are the main Member States driving the initiatives related to this commemoration. We commend all other partners for their support, particularly UNESCO, which recently completed the first phase of the competition to identify a design for the slavery memorial that will be erected in a prominent place here at the United Nations to honour the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

May we all together make a success of completing the memorial, so ably led from within our region, and may we never forget.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of San Marino, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and other States.

Mr. Bodini (San Marino): It is a great honour for San Marino to address the General Assembly on behalf of the Group of Western European and other States as we gather today to commemorate the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

Today we pay tribute to the millions of victims of the transatlantic slave trade, who were subjected to exploitation and abuse, both physical and mental. For hundreds years, those victims were removed from their homes and denied their freedom.

There is no more heinous crime than depriving a human being of his dignity. More than ever before, we stand behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

Every day, we States Members of the United Nations redouble our efforts in addressing new daunting challenges that our world has to face. But we also have to look at the past and to learn from it. In that respect, we must educate our children about the unacceptable and unjustifiable crime of slavery. That disgrace for humankind was finally brought to an end, but we have to remember the injustices committed and ensure that they are never forgotten or repeated.

Unfortunately, today we are witnessing a different but not less degrading form of slavery, namely, the trafficking of persons and human organs, sexual slavery, child labour, forced marriages and the sale of children. Millions of people worldwide continue to be treated as property. That unacceptable practice affects all of us. The victims of today's slavery come from the poorest, most vulnerable and most marginalized social groups of our societies.

We are all born free and equal. We need to work together in order to built a better world and a better future in which slavery in all its forms is eradicated and every person is equal in rights and dignity.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the United States of America, who will speak on behalf of the host country.

Mrs. DiCarlo (United States of America): We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in this commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The United States joins others in paying tribute to the millions of victims who were taken from their homes in Africa and sold into brutal slavery that lasted generations and forever changed the lives of their descendants. The suffering they endured must never be forgotten. We also honour today all those, on both sides of the Atlantic, who struggled to abolish slavery and the trade that sustained it.

The United States remains committed to preserving the memory of slavery within our own country's history. We celebrate National African American History Month every February, as a mark of pride in African-Americans and as a rejection of the attitudes that permitted slavery to exist for so long in a country founded on a fundamental commitment to human freedom and dignity. We remember also that the terrible effects of slavery lingered for decades even after it was officially ended in the United States.

The United States has been enriched by African-American leaders who, by word and example, have sought to cast off the burden of slavery and keep our

country true to its founding principles. Dr. Ralph Bunch, Dr. Martin Luther King and many more strengthened our nation by leading reforms, overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers. African-Americans now serve at all levels of Government and play an important role in all parts of society. We have made progress, but we have more to do.

Last year was the International Year for People of African Descent, an initiative we supported both at the United Nations and at the Organization of American States. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton described it as an opportunity for all of us around the globe to celebrate the diversity of our societies and to honour the contributions that our fellow citizens of African descent make every day to the economic, social, and political fabrics of our communities.

As part of that effort, the United States is engaging with civil society and host Governments in the Western Hemisphere on a set of programmes aimed at highlighting the contributions made by people of African descent. We continue to work closely with the Governments of Brazil and Colombia on action plans to eliminate racial and ethnic discrimination and promote equality in our respective countries. We are also partnering with Brazil in launching an anti-racism curriculum project at UNESCO.

Finally, we must remember that contemporary forms of slavery exist today. Trafficking in persons is modern-day slavery — women and girls sold, forced or tricked into prostitution; men, women and children labouring in slavery-like conditions; and children stolen and sold and put on the streets as beggars. Through the work of the United States President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, we are seeking to raise public awareness of existing protections and to improve the way that we protect trafficking victims and prosecute human trafficking cases within our borders.

The United States will continue to work in the United Nations and elsewhere to end modern-day slavery, bring traffickers to justice and empower survivors to reclaim their rightful freedom.

The President: I now give the floor to Mr. Rick Kittles, Scientific Director of African Ancestry, Incorporated, based in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Kittles: I want to thank the General Assembly for the invitation to speak today on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade — also known in Kiswahili as the "Miafa", or "great tragedy", and, by many descendents of enslaved Africans, as the "the African Holocaust".

The Middle Passage was a stage of the triangular trade in which millions of enslaved Africans, mainly from West, West-Central and Eastern Africa, were shipped to the New World as part of the Atlantic slave trade. Voyages on the Middle Passage were a large financial undertaking, generally organized by companies or groups of investors and, in many cases, countries. European Powers such as Spain, Portugal, France, England, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden took part in the trade, as did traders in the Caribbean, South America and North America. We know that because the forced kidnapping and free labour was a business and, as in most businesses, records were kept, at least during the period when it was legal, up until the mid-1800s. We therefore have much for which to thank the historians, economists, anthropologists, archaeologists and geneticists such as myself who have studied the history and the impact of the transatlantic slave trade across the African diaspora.

I look forward to working with the new generation of scientists and historians who will make advances on what has been done in terms of research so that the millions of descendents of enslaved Africans recognize that their history did not start with slavery in the antebellum South. It is tragic to go to middle schools and high schools and see young African-American children cringing during history class when the slave trade is discussed because many of them believe their history started with slavery.

We therefore have to educate young people and let them know that their history did not start with slavery, but that their ancestors went through the period of slavery. We have to let them know that they are the descendents of proud, productive and purposeful people who resisted and survived the worst holocaust in the history of the world.

It is that history that connects Africans in the diaspora; whether it is the Gullah or Geechee people in the Sea Islands of South Carolina or the Afro-Brazilian, they are all bound by their shared history, just as the Mende rice growers in Sierra Leone or from the upper Guinea coast and the Mbangala from Angola had a common experience when they were shackled and led

along to the coast to forts to wait for ships to take them across the Atlantic on the Middle Passage.

The shackles, the binding and the shared experience are what have brought us here today — the tie that binds. It connects people from one of the greatest continents of our planet — the African continent, which is rich with minerals and resources as well as with cultural and biological diversity. Africa is also the continent where, because of biology and geography, its inhabitants were labelled as inferior and then enslaved.

The tie that binds links shared cultures. Athough the transatlantic slave trade tried to efface traditions and cultures and to stop the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, remnants of African cultures have survived in the Americas. The shared culture across the diaspora is a beacon alerting the lost descendents to homes unknown.

African-Americans and Africans in the diaspora in the New World have had a unique population history, one that has not been shared by any other group on the planet, one in which there is a loss of family and cultural ties. What binds us therefore in terms of humanity allows us to infer family history and ancestry; by that, I mean DNA — the genetic material in every cell of our bodies, inherited by from our parents — 50 per cent from our mothers, 50 per cent from our fathers. They inherited their DNA from their parents and their grandparents and on and on. That chain, that hierarchy, links us to family, communities and regions on continents. It is because of that DNA, that genetic material, that we pass genes on to our children. Unlike languages, it could not be removed. Unlike cultures and traditions, it could not be lost. That DNA resisted and survived.

When we look at the genetics of African people in the diaspora, we see those of the Mende, Temne, Kru, Capelli, Massa, Mafa, Akan and Kwee peoples. We see the Mandingo and the Wolof in that genetic material because that material has not changed and has not been lost. We are able to do that because of the African genetic diversity. Humankind started in Africa. I do not think that I need to tell participants that. We all know that now. Scientists have proved that humankind started in Africa. Because of that, populations have been in Africa for a very long time — a lot of time for variation to occur in the genetic material. We use that genetic information to seek ancestry for people who have been part of the transatlantic slave trade and who are descendants of that trade.

As I mentioned, Africa is a continent with not only rich natural resources, but also biological resources. That richness calls for survival and resistance in the face of the harsh treatment and racism of the transatlantic slave trade. That variation also provides for the biological diversity and physical features, as well as disease and health. Scientists have suggested that between 15 to 30 per cent of enslaved Africans did not make it across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. There was a very high mortality rate due to infectious diseases and lack of water, food and nutrients.

We need to explore that because the current state of health among people of African descent in the diaspora is very poor and quite problematic. Health disparities must be a focus at the international level, given its impact among people of African descent in the diaspora. We see common complex diseases, such as type-2 diabetes, asthma, cancer and heart disease, all of which are linked to genes and the environment and should be recognized as matters of social justice alongside issues such as reparations.

I have been blessed to work with a group called African Ancestry, where we use and leverage DNA to trace the ancestry of descendants of enslaved Africans to connect them with their lost homeland. When we provide that service, how the excitement changes the psyche of many African Americans is quite interesting when they realize and find their lost ancestral connection. A friend of mine, an actor and activist named Isaiah Washington, once said that DNA has a memory. That is true. DNA has a memory that led me to the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria in my search to understand and connect with the Hausa people, with whom I share a portion of my genetic ancestry. In the summer of 2000, that was exciting and life-changing for me and for others.

DNA also has a memory such that, in the past two years, it has allowed people of African descent in the diaspora to go to Cameroon with a non-profit group called ArchAmer. They have created ties between African Americans and different ethnic groups in Cameroon, which has created tremendous excitement. Those are examples of where, I believe, we need to go in order to deal with the impact and the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of New Zealand.

Mr. McLay (New Zealand): Slavery is an abomination. It always has been an abomination and, regrettably, in the twenty-first century, it still is.

As an expression of solidarity with all victims of slavery, New Zealand has decided to contribute the sum of $10,000 to the United Nations Trust Fund for Partnerships — Permanent Memorial. In so doing, we thank the Caribbean Community and Jamaica for bringing the issue before the General Assembly. In addition, the staff of the Permanent Mission of New Zealand to the United Nations will personally contribute to a collective Mission donation to the Fund. That, too, is an expression of very personal solidarity with all victims of slavery.

The President: I now invite participants to view a performance by the National Ballet of Cameroon.

The members of the General Assembly watched a dance performance.

The President: The General Assembly has thus concluded its commemorative meeting on the occasion of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

May I take it that the General Assembly decides to conclude its consideration of agenda item 119?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 4.55 p.m.